Interview with Marshall Brement

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR MARSHALL BREMENT

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Today is April 11, 1990. This is an interview with Ambassador Marshall Brement. This is the second interview with him. It is being done on behalf of the Institute for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: We have already gotten your background in the previous interview, and so I am going to hop in and look at your early Chinese experience, starting with your Chinese training. How would you characterize the people who were taking Chinese with you? What motivated them, where did they come from?

BREMENT: I was in a class of five; there were two USIA officers, Don Soergel and Bill Riddell. They both had Asian experience and thought China was a good place to study. My two State Department colleagues were Jim Leonard who was later in the Far East Section in INR, and then retired and later came back as Andy Young's deputy in New York at the UN; a very able fellow. Jim had already been in Moscow. He was older than the rest of us. He must have been in his mid-'30s, 35-36. He already had Russian and thought Chinese was a good thing to have. The other fellow, Jack Freidman, was in INR, an intelligence analyst who was interested in the Far East, I guess. I think all the people in there were

interested in East Asia in some way, and thought that China was obviously a good place to start studying because there was going to be a new generation of China hands.

Q: Well part of this motivation—this is '57-'59—the motivation is interesting because the People's Republic was absolutely closed. Was the feeling, "well, this will be opened up fairly soon?" and we want to be there at the gate when it does?

BREMENT: I think the feeling was that China was going to be opening up some day. It was hard to foresee how it was going to happen— and that certainly the Far East was going to remain a very central foreign policy problem for the United States—and that China and Chinese were going to be at the center of it, not only in China itself but in the rest of Asia. I think that is what motivated most of the people. I would say that my group were all people who had started from scratch. Other people who were with us in T'aichung like Burt Levin, most recently our Ambassador to Burma, had already done a tour in Taipei, and had come quite far in Chinese, so he was at an intermediate level. Stape Roy, who was Ambassador to Singapore and is now Executive Secretary of the Department, had been raised in China, so he had a good bit of Chinese to begin with. Calvin Mehlert also had done a tour in Taipei, and was studying to reach the interpreter level. So there was a mixed group. Some had started from scratch, others had had some Chinese, so they sort of joined us along the way.

Q: What were you absorbing as you were going through this training, talking both to your fellow officers and the more senior officers, about how we should deal with the PRC?

BREMENT: At that point, it was really a question. We had major policy questions on how we should deal with the PRC—and not only how to deal with the PRC, but how to deal with the government of the Republic of China, Taiwan, and how to deal with the rest of Southeast Asia. China was a major factor in all those areas. At that time, of course, the view of the State Department, certainly John Foster Dulles, and Walter Robertson who was Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and who I work for as a staff assistant,

was very anti-Chinese. They were holding the line in a most dogged way, on little things as well as big things, such as calling the capital Peiping. It was considered a very important indicator. Anybody who said Peking got an instant telegram from the Department of State, saying that it was not to be called Peking.

Q: Why?

BREMENT: Because Peiping is what the Chinese Nationalists called it. Beijing in Chinese means northern capital, and when Chiang Kai-shek moved the capital to Nanking, meaning “southern capital,” he renamed Beijing, Peiping—or “northern peace.” If you used Peking you were using the name the Chinese communists called it, and if you used Peiping, you were using the term the Chinese nationalists called it and because we only recognized one government in China and that government was supposedly temporarily located in Taipei, it became very important to Walter Robertson, and to the Department of State, to call Beijing Peiping, because the return to the mainland was still a long term possibility, although few of us who were studying Chinese thought it was much of a possibility. But the State Department sure thought of it as a possibility.

Q: There's always two perceptions, one there is a policy perception, and you had worked with Walter Robertson, and knew what one was supposed to say, but sort of among yourselves, how did you see things turning out there, as far as policy went? Did you feel that it was a rational policy, or did you feel that it was overly emotional?

BREMENT: Well, I think given the attitude of the Chinese government at that time, it was a rational policy. The United States had, after all, fought a major war in Korea against the Chinese, and had suffered a hundred thousand casualties. That is not a minor event. And even in the diplomatic counter-play that followed it, you had the bombardment of Quemoy and Matsu, which was considered serious enough by the United States government to think about using nuclear weapons. Nobody, I think, ever propounded the idea, but at least the idea was given some currency, which shows how serious it was considered.

You had Dien Bien Phu and I think it was a very unfortunate misperception in the minds of many people in the '50s and in the '60s and again in the '70s that the Vietnamese were somehow to the Chinese as the Poles were to the Soviets, with again a complete misperception of what the Poles were to the Soviets. It's really a rather good analogy because, as you know, Chinese and Vietnamese were cooperating at the time and themselves were making hundreds of statements that the Chinese and the Vietnamese were as close as “lips and teeth”. The reality is that the Vietnamese looked on the Chinese as the historical encroacher on Vietnam and there was always going to be distance between the Vietnamese and the Chinese. But with a lot of us, and with me personally, one got a little confused by reading what was coming out of the Chinese Communist press, which I did after I spent two years in Taiwan and then I went up and read Chinese newspapers for three years in Hong Kong, one year as head of the Press Monitoring Unit. My job was entirely to monitor the Chinese press. I had a bunch of Chinese translators and we turned out 70-80 pages a day of translations from the Chinese press. And if you read that stuff, the policy of the State Department made a good bit of sense because you got a picture of what was happening in China which in retrospect was not really accurate. You got a sense of a pervasive totalitarianism which was having a great deal more success in changing the psyche of the Chinese than was actually the case.

In my own case, I was enormously impressed when in 1963 the Chinese had suffered a tremendous economic downturn, as the result of the Great Leap Forward, where there was actual starvation in pockets of China, and partly as a result of that they opened the border to Hong Kong and let about 50 to 60 thousand Chinese go across the border. A lot of them came into the consulate to try and get visas and whatever, and though I wasn't usually the person that they talked with—the fellow who was what they called the “walk-in man” was on leave or something—and so they asked me to do it for a couple weeks just at this period. I had the experience ten, twenty times where a 17 year-old would walk into my office with his cousin from Hong Kong and they'd be sitting there these two 17 year-olds talking about possibly going to the States or whatever, and talk about what was going on in

China and you couldn't really tell the difference between the two. They were absolutely the same.

I'd been reading all those years about political meetings where they would condemn the Yugoslavs and praise the Albanians and so forth, of course these kids didn't know Yugoslavs from Albanians and they hardly knew what Germany was. So it was quite obvious to me that all these things that I'd been reading about were not an accurate portrayal of reality, and the sort of ageless China was still going on and the ethnic Chinese that by that time I knew quite well were the same on both sides of the border—that all this political indoctrination the Chinese were undergoing was only skin deep.

Q: I think that probably, looking at it now, because with the year 1990 where things have fallen apart in the Communist world, probably the greatest misperception we had, and I am speaking about we professionals in the Foreign Service had, was over-valuing the role of indoctrination, that if you got somebody you really could turn people around. You don't do much politically, but all the old ethnic animosities rise up too.

BREMENT: Yes, and indeed the impression serves a useful function of keeping these old animosities under the rocks. You lift the rock up and by God they are still there. It is curious. Not only is it certainly true in Europe, but most of us, or some of us anyway, tend to think of the Chinese as the inscrutable Asians. Of course this is nonsense. The Chinese are no different in their reaction to tyranny and misrule than we are. What happens of course is that people confuse time differences with racial differences. You can't compare Shanghai in the '30s with New York in the '30s. You ought to compare Shanghai in the '30s with London in the 1750's, and then you get the sense of what kind of turmoil was going on there. And so it surprised us somewhat when you see in Eastern Europe that indoctrination did not achieve its goal. But when we see the same thing in China, it surprised most of us a lot more, because we have this racial stereotype of the long-suffering, patient, and docile Asian.

Q: We are trying to reconstruct how people thought about such events at the time...one of the advantages of this type of interview showing how we were thinking at the time, we really weren't, we thought here is a big mass of people who are being incurably indoctrinated into a hatred of the United States and to a devotion to Communism and all. Now how about...

BREMENT: It is actually astounding how things have developed...you know that since China was closed I never got into the mainland until 1988, and since I had been away from China since 1963 and away from Asia since I left Saigon in '74, the impact of my visit to China was very great on me. I really was thinking very much of the China I had been looking at in 1963 when I was there. The same thought kept coming to me over and over again, the same images of how different things were in China then, how unimaginable the things that were happening in China would have been compared to what we were seeing in '60 to '63. If you are talking about the '50s then you really have to think of the Sino-Soviet bloc, this tremendous mass of humanity with atomic power, an enormous army, unlimited population, unlimited armies, this tremendous enemy that we were facing. And this was the dominant sort of image we carried with us and it really was the image that our policy makers had.

Q: What was your impression of the language students on Taiwan of the Chiang Kai-shek government, its effectiveness and where it was going?

BREMENT: Again that varied by the philosophical input that people brought into it. A lot of people were very much anti-Chiang Kai-shek, for various understandable reasons. Others were more or less neutral. I myself felt that given the situation they had, they were adopting a really sensible policy. There was no question at that time they were oppressing the local Taiwanese, and indeed there had been a massacre there in the late forties, which was criminal. But that really wasn't Chiang Kai-shek's doing. It was a local governor who exceeded any instructions he might have had. So what you had was an economy that was in the pre-takeoff period. There was indeed universal education. They were adopting

sensible fiscal and financial policies. So I guess I was more on the conservative side among my colleagues, but not extraordinarily so. I was fairly content living there.

Taiwan is probably the most changed place in the world—certainly the most changed that I have seen. My favorite headline of all time was in the China News of 1957 shortly after I got to Taiwan. The headline was “Bull Shit, Bull Shit Everywhere.” And what they were complaining about was the droppings of the water buffaloes which were a hazard to traffic and a nuisance to pedestrians. They expressed this annoyance straightforwardly while not quite having the English idiom.

But when you think of what Taipei was by 1970, the differences were enormous. There were certainly no water buffalo around. When I got to Taiwan, Taipei was very much a provincial Japanese city with Japanese houses and with only one tall building, the Grand Hotel, which was 10 stories. And now it looks like Manhattan. It is an enormous financial success story. Now we language students were in T'aichung, which was a very sleepy backwater and we really weren't intruded upon too much by the embassy. We were really off by ourselves. Events in Taiwan didn't impinge upon us. Some of the people had a little bit of Japanese and some had a little Taiwanese and some had been in Taiwan before. They took more of an anti-government view than the rest of us.

Q: Was there a feeling that this was all temporary and that eventually the PRC was going to take the place over?

BREMENT: Some had that feeling but it was hard to imagine how that was going to happen exactly. Not only because of the Seventh Fleet, but Taiwan still had a very able defense force. And it is not a trivial matter to cross a hundred miles of sea to invade an enemy that knows what it is doing. The Chinese didn't have much of a navy, so though it was possible to conceive of Quemoy and Matsu being taken over by China, since they are in the arbor of Amoy, somewhat like Staten Island.

Q: When you think about it, Hitler balked about trying for England which was twenty miles against, at that point, a disorganized army.

BREMENT: Even today, there is no way China could carry it off militarily, unless they wanted to use nuclear weapons. But they wouldn't drop nuclear weapons on other Chinese. Of course, Quemoy and Matsu were the tip-off, the Chinese could have had them any time they wanted. They still could have them, and they still don't. But I was just noticing the other day that the Taiwanese are now the biggest tourists in China, more than any other place. That is astounding.

Q: You went to Hong Kong, you were there from 1960 to 1963, who was the Consul General then?

BREMENT: When I got there it was Julius Holmes. Then for a short while it was Sam Gilstrap, then Marshall Green.

Q: What sort of waves were emanating from the leadership there as far as how we were looking at things and how we were reporting and all?

BREMENT: I think it was pretty much “call it as you see it”, to describe actually what's happening. And there was no particular policy problem in doing that because China at that point was going through major difficulties.

Q: This was the Great Leap Forward?

BREMENT: The collapse after the Great Leap Forward. The Great Leap was from 1958-60, and then Communist China collapsed completely, so it was a very difficult period for China.

Q: Were we seeing this? I think of these back yard steel furnaces and all that sort of thing, all of which was rather ridiculous.

BREMENT: You would get a chunk of steel you could pick up like this, just a puff of metal. Yes, we were getting a pretty good picture because we had access to people who had access to the mainland all the time, including people who were resident in China. We also had a lot of Chinese refugees coming out one way or another into Hong Kong and who were being interrogated in various interrogation units run by the British and we had access to that. We had first hand information on what was happening there. It was very clear that they were going through great economic turmoil. The party seemed in full control, so there was no problem there in terms of control. There was no political problem.

Q: After the advent of the Kennedy administration, I mean as far as our work was going, did you report it differently?

BREMENT: Well Bobby Kennedy came through Hong Kong in '62 and I was his control officer. So I spent a couple days with him, sort of 24 hours a day—the whole entourage, John Sigenthaler and Brandon Grove, who was the State Department Officer accompanying Kennedy. Quite clearly Kennedy had a different view of China, he was sort of scratching around for new ideas, and new ways to think about it. That was the only whiff I got of that. You have to remember of course that Dean Rusk was as hard line on China as anybody. He was the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs during the Korean War. Indeed, the more we got involved in Vietnam, the more we kept up hostility to China, because China was unremitting in its support for the Vietnamese.

The Sino-Soviet split developed at that time. The Chinese were contrasting their own revolutionary fervor in kicking the Americans around with Khrushchev's phoney communism, as they would put it. So the Chinese were quite hostile to us and they were not leaving much room for, no matter what you thought about the desirability or inevitability of, one day having some kind of restoration of relations with China. The Chinese were not giving us any sort of opening. Certainly not in what they were writing and saying.

Q: I think this is often forgotten. It takes two to tango. They had their own policy reasons for not getting involved with us.

BREMENT: Very important policy reasons. And, indeed, they looked at the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and took a very tough line against Khrushchev for backing off against the United States. Their whole foreign policy thrust was in support of various insurgencies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. According to Mao, we were a “paper tiger.” They really weren't giving us any opening.

Q: In your job, you were monitoring this, did the Sino-Soviet split come as a shock or a surprise, or was this something you gradually saw developing?

BREMENT: In my own case, since I was directly reading this stuff, there was no question about what had happened. Many at first were denying that anything was happening. They were saying, “well, it is happening, but it is only an internecine, family quarrel, and both of them are united in their opposition to the United States.” That was probably true enough, but really was sort of downplaying it in a way that it should not have been downplayed. For decades some people were saying that there really was no split between the two, which was an absurdity for anybody who was reading what was being written by the Chinese, who were very good, even entertaining, at the sort of polemic they were carrying off—Deng Xiaoping being one of the best. There was no question that the bitterness was enormous, the sense of grievance was great, and that there was no real chance of any repair of this break without a complete change in the Soviet Union, a complete surrendering to this Chinese left-radical position.

Q: A question on how things work, here you were reading these papers, you had other people reading the papers, you would bring them together, then what happened to your product?

BREMENT: You mean the press monitoring or the...

Q: Well, the press monitoring and then keep it going. You were seeing this...?

BREMENT: Well, the press monitoring was really more of an administrative job than an analytical or policy job because essentially I had ten Chinese translators and Chinese editors and they picked up what was important from the Chinese press and I sort of looked over their shoulder. Then it was translated and put out in documents. We had something like 500 subscribers. We turned out a lot of paper and my job was essentially just to run the unit.

Q: Was this a joint translation unit or was it strictly an American?

BREMENT: This was an American effort by the Consulate.

Q: I was in Yugoslavia one time and we had a joint translation service, the British and the Americans did the same thing, except we shared expenses. You were absorbing a lot of information and really first hand information, or at least good solid second hand information, how did that work its way through the Consulate General?

BREMENT: Well, of course there was a political section of the Consulate General which was reporting the politics, and an economic section which was reporting on the economics. And when I saw something that should be flagged or would be of interest to them I'd call over and say we had it. But of course they got these documents so they went through them themselves. If something hot came in or something very interesting, something that I knew people were working on, I would call over and let them know. But I only did the press monitoring job for a year. Then I spent two years in the political section covering internal political developments in China.

Q: What sort of reporting was going on then? Were there any pressures to focus on certain areas or to downplay things?

BREMENT: No, I think people just were reporting what they considered to be of interest. There was something called a “Weeka” in those days, a weekly compilation of events of interest, which was turned in by every Foreign Service post, and which wasn't a bad idea. It since has been done away with. Of course you wrote telegrams about major developments as they occurred, as well as dispatches which were mailed in. Again, a form which is now done away with. So you had telegrams which were essentially things on the front burner which you thought might be of interest immediately to the desk, if not higher levels of the Department. And then you had dispatches which were more thoughtful pieces where you might come in with a more abstruse analysis of a subject such as “labor conditions in the mines of Shanghai,” as revealed in some interesting criticism in the Shanghai press, or something like that.

I was covering the internal politics of China and it seemed very quiet in the sense that there was nothing of any great interest to report, because the leadership kept up a united front. Again it shows how little you know when you are looking at it from the outside. For those of us who were looking at it then, it looked like a united leadership. Of course, it was soon to break apart completely, but when people asked me about friction within the leadership I would have to say that this top leadership with a few exceptions had been together since 1932, and that's 30 years. And indeed if they are going to break apart somebody has got to make the case and prove why they are going to break apart. The assumption has to be that they have been together for 30 years and they are going to stay together. But of course they did break apart. And given the tensions they were under, that's not too surprising. It's not surprising at all if you think of what was going to happen in the Great Leap Forward, which was inconceivable at that time...I'm sorry, I mean the Great Cultural Revolution, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Q: The Great Leap Forward had faltered badly?

BREMENT: The Great Leap Forward had faltered badly, and a few of the leaders like Peng Dehuai had gone down as a result of criticism of Mao. Of course what happened

in the Cultural Revolution was that by that period Mao clearly saw that the bureaucratism which had taken over in the Soviet Union, which he was strongly critical of, was in the process of taking hold in China as well. This was true. It is a sound analogy. He felt that the only possible way of stopping it was to have another revolution form below, to unleash the students as a revolutionary force. That was perfectly good analysis, and it really was the only way to have stopped it. But of course you couldn't really stop it.

Q: The Cultural Revolution started in '66?

BREMENT: Yes, in '66.

Q: Now because we had this other interview which covers some of the transitional bridges, lets move to a completely different subject and this is going to Moscow, you were there from '64 to '66? What were you doing while you were there?

BREMENT: I was Second Secretary in the Political Section and I had the Far-eastern job. I was covering Soviet relations with all the countries from Australia through India, which at that time was sort of the premier job in the political section because I had Sino-Soviet relations, I had the Vietnam war, a coup in Indonesia, I had the Indo- Pakistan war where Kosygin was the mediator. Soviet-Japanese relations were always interesting. So 60-70% of the cables written in the political section were done by me.

Q: You had this almost unique ability to look, was there a difference between the Soviet hand and the China hand? I'm talking about in the American Foreign Service. Did you see any differences?

BREMENT: Yes, I think so, definitely. The China hand tended to be quite enamored of China and Chinese civilization. He certainly liked the comfort of it, the food. The Chinese are easy to deal with. Chinese servants, if you have good ones, are wonderful. So when you were in the China milieu you were a gentleman and you lived a pretty good life, sort of a happy life anyway, at least in Hong Kong and Taiwan or anywhere in Southeast Asia.

And certainly it is true in Peking. I know several people who have served in Peking and Moscow both. And there is no question that they liked Peking better, even though it is quite a dusty place.

You have to differentiate between those people who came to the Soviet Union from a West European background and those who came from other backgrounds. Those who came from a West European background, and their wives, certainly never got over a sort of culture shock—the grimness, the dour sort of nature of the Russians which is only on the surface, but it is there. If you get into an elevator with a bunch of Russians they will all be stone-faced, whereas we tend to smile at strangers. It is a cultural thing. But the inconveniences of life, the terrible climate, all these things wear on people, and of course the microphones everywhere have a big effect. Somehow they don't seem to have as big an effect in China, I don't know why. Microphones are there too, but in the Soviet Union it really got to a lot of people.

If psychologically you are the kind of person who would find it very difficult having a microphone in your bedroom, then you found life in the Soviet Union very difficult indeed. So when you finally crossed the border into Finland or Poland or wherever you went it was like a great weight coming off your shoulders. I never particularly felt that. I enjoyed Moscow because professionally it was really what it was all about. I was working for the State Department and that was what the State Department was focusing on. I was happy there in that sense and also culturally. Moscow was a world class city if you like music and theater. They had their own style, but when it was good it was certainly as good as anybody. It was a great cosmopolitan center, with a genuine culture which was fascinating. It could be oppressive. I think it was important to get out of Moscow. But I think it is important to get out of anyplace occasionally.

Q: The prime focus of your work was obviously on the Sino-Soviet relationship at that point. How did you see it? You are looking at it from absolutely the other side of the moon.

Were the Soviets sort of “lovers rebuffed?” or how were you seeing that they were reacting to this? Did they understand this or were they trying to do anything about it?

BREMENT: The Soviets understood it. I was there for the full show. Kosygin, who was really the number one at that point, did try to repair relations with China. And I think the Soviets would have gone much further if the Chinese had been interested. But the Chinese were really not interested in anything less than a capitulation. And the Soviets, for perfectly good reasons from their point of view, really couldn't capitulate to China without giving up their leadership of the world communist movement, which at that point was inconceivable to them. These were all people who came to the forefront under Stalin and very much felt that one of the reasons that Khrushchev had to go was because he handled things so badly diplomatically in the international sphere and also in the international communist movement. They were just about to have a conference in Bucharest in December '64 where the international communist movement was about to split apart. By removing Khrushchev and postponing that conference and by taking what they called a “principled” position, which meant support for Vietnam among other things, they reasserted themselves within the communist movement. The communist movement was coming apart. You had the Chinese communists on the left and the Euro-communists on the right, along with the Yugoslavs. The Soviets felt this pressure and felt they had to do something about it and the way to go about it was to adopt a sensible, reasonable, principled policy that would appeal to most communist parties and would move the Chinese way out to the fringe, which they did.

Q: Were the Soviets as you watched in the international sphere sort of dumping on the Chinese?

BREMENT: Yes, they were using every opportunity to dump on the Chinese, and their line essentially was, “look, these guys are talking this revolutionary line but they really aren't acting that way.” Here we are really supporting the Vietnamese; we want to send more goods, ship more arms and so on, but they won't even let us send things to Vietnam

across China. It is defeating the Vietnamese war effort. We, the Soviets are faithful to our international obligations. The Chinese talk a good game but they really don't do anything." That is essentially what the Soviets were saying, and I think they did turn the situation around. In only three or four years, only the Asian parties were with the Chinese. This was not a question of the rightness or the wrongness of the line they were propounding, it was just a question of politics.

[TAPE GARBLED FOR 5 MINUTES]

Q: You are talking about a zero sum game, that anything that was bothering us was good for the Soviets and vice-versa.

BREMENT: There was certainly a lot of that. But it was more than that. It was a situation where the Soviets benefited enormously— and had no reason at all to help us extract ourselves from Vietnam. We were not giving them any reason to change their policy or to try to influence the Vietnamese to change their policy, because we were saying right from the start, "this is not between us, we don't have any quarrel with you," as though the Soviets had nothing to do with it. But of course it was Soviet weaponry that was being used by the Vietnamese to kill Americans. It was Soviet oil that was being used to drive the weapons. And we were just ignoring that minor fact. Indeed, we were offering no pain to the Soviets because of their actions.

Q: Was there any thought of saying, "well if we are going to do this let's blockage the country?"

BREMENT: Indeed, I wrote a letter that Foy Kohler, who was my Ambassador then, saying missions like the Harriman mission don't make any sense, that the Soviets benefit enormously from the Vietnam war and if we want to make them change we have to impose penalties on them for having this war continue. In other words, we have to up the ante. We have to make it dangerous. We have to give them reasons to want this situation to end. If we don't do that, they will not only not help us out of the situation, but they will

do everything they can to keep us in the treacle, in a situation that we can't get out of. Amazingly enough we got a letter from Tommy Thompson saying we can't do that because it might push the Soviets and the Chinese back together again, which I found completely extraordinary at that point. This was '65 or '66 and I was following Sino-Soviet affairs and knew that there was nothing the United States could do that could drive the Soviets and the Chinese back together again.

Q: This was the "wish is father to the thought." I'm not sure if that was the right expression, but we saw things, we were going to be helping Vietnam, and no matter what we do...we were always worried that something else would happen that would deter us.

BREMENT: That's right. It was very difficult for us to see the real chasms because maybe we were too hung up on the ideology. We kept thinking of Communism as a world movement, and it was hard to see that you could have two major communist powers split without them coming back together at some point. That certainly was the perception. And then the perception at home was that you could have guns and butter at the same time. You could fight a war, keep it a moderate war and at the same time have a good society, or "Great Society," I should say, and all that implied. I remember I was at Stanford after I left Moscow. I remember Paul Kreisberg coming through. He was one of the State Department speakers and I heard him saying that. I had grave doubts at that point myself as to whether we could have guns and butter, since I was living through the cultural revolution in California at the time. I think the answer was, that we couldn't. You can't fight a war sort of half-way. If it's a real war, you are paying heavily for that war. If you are fighting against someone who is giving a total effort and you are giving a partial effort, you are not going to prevail.

Q: Moving on to another question, how did you see the reaction of the Soviets to the Indonesian coup in 1965 when Suharto moved Sukarno out, and took care of the Communists? It was a peculiar thing in that it would stick on doing something to Chinese

Communists, but here was a really major nation although very often underrated. Were the Soviets sort of chuckling at this? How did they feel about it?

BREMENT: They very much low-keyed the situation. They said, we are out of there and this doesn't have very much to do with us. I think that a certain amount of satisfaction could be gleaned. Of course they had been kicked out by Sukarno, and there was very much of a Chinese involvement in the killing of the Indonesian general, which led to a counter-coup. So I think that quiet satisfaction is how one would characterize Moscow's reaction. But it didn't get much play in the Soviet press.

Q: Speaking about this, how did you deal with the Soviets? Were you able to talk to Soviet officials, or others, or was it pretty much a press operation?

BREMENT: In those days you were very restricted in terms of your dealing with Soviets. Indeed, it was possible to establish friendly relations with Soviets but only with Soviets who had their tickets punched to do that sort of thing. So I did have a couple of friends who were either in the Institutes, or...one was a newspaper man of sorts. He died shortly thereafter. He was quite frank, or moderately frank, but always within certain limitations. So you mainly got your impressions from the press, from talking to other people in the foreign community. At that point, Moscow was the only place where I had been where the diplomatic community was very useful. In every other place I had been, the American embassy was a useful tool for other people. But really you didn't get too much out of the other diplomats. You had Asian diplomats there to talk with if you were covering Asia. You had the Indians there who were really quite close to the Soviets and very smart diplomats. They were very worthwhile talking to about the whole range of affairs. You had Australians.

When I was there—before the six day war—you had Israelis who were excellent, because they were natives to the Soviet Union. They would be like you or me being a diplomat in Washington. You have a certain sense of the country that you can't get otherwise. Of

course, a certain amount of information came through normal diplomatic intercourse with the Soviets, but since I was covering third country things, I didn't have that much of it in my first tour. I had some of it when the Ambassador would go in to talk about Vietnam, or he'd talk to some of the other Ambassadors. I would go along with him about Asian matters.

You were spending your full time focusing on it, which was of course a wonderful way to get the mind together. So you were picking up a lot by osmosis. All your antennae were out to try to get it, but it was not so much directly retrieved from the Soviets. The big difference between my first tour in Moscow and my second, separated by eight years, was that in the second tour there were dissidents, so you could actually talk to Soviets who were anti-regime, which you couldn't do at all the first time.

Q: You were there during the fall of the Khrushchev, how did you and the others in the Embassy view the fall of Khrushchev, and Kosygin coming in? Was this a good thing for us or a bad thing? How did we feel about it?

BREMENT: Well, I remember, it was interesting, on October 15th we had a meeting at the Embassy. Mac Toon, who was the Political Counselor, had come in that night and done a preliminary cable saying why Khrushchev fell. And everyone of the people at the meeting who were specializing in anything at the embassy came up with their own reasons for his fall. The Agricultural Attach# probably had it better than anybody else, it was because Khrushchev was trying to split the party into agricultural and industrial branches, which really got at some very deep seated power positions of people. But of course I said it was because the international communist movement was heading for an irrevocable split, with the Chinese becoming more prominent. The economists said things were terrible in the economy. So everybody had his own reasons and they added up to the fact that Khrushchev had alienated all the Soviet power bases.

We did not see it as particularly good or bad for the United States. I think in retrospect, Khrushchev comes out as much more a positive individual and more of a positive force

than we felt at the time. Most people thought of him in terms of the Cuban missile crisis, the Berlin crises. We thought of this blusterer who kept making crises and kept bringing us trouble and who indeed talked in a menacing way about Soviet military capabilities...sometimes he talked one way and sometimes the other. But sometimes he talked a very tough line, and would threaten war. So I don't think anybody thought we were losing much when they got rid of Khrushchev.

In retrospect I think we missed a lot. We missed a lot in 1955 I think, we missed opportunities with Khrushchev, and that is too bad, too bad that we missed them. I think we just weren't looking. And we didn't have a strategy or a receptivity to change in the Soviet Union. So much depends on the mental construct that you bring to a situation, even before you get into it. I think we had this idea of a Stalinist country and Khrushchev was the new Stalin in a different way. And although he was doing certain things that were quite revolutionary, we didn't want to take advantage of them because they were at variance with our preconceptions.

Q: I saw pictures of him standing behind Stalin, he was one of the crew. I think this is one of the things, we hope as we go through this oral history, we go back and see how we looked at things at the time.

BREMENT: There's certainly a difference in my own view. I would certainly have subscribed to the view that Khrushchev was a very dangerous man. And therefore when he fell, it was very interesting, it was of course the first coup d'etat in communist history, but it was not really seen as being of great benefit and as not much difference for the United States.

Q: No matter what it was it was basically really a monolith which had its own ideology which was hostile to us and that was that.

BREMENT: Yes, exactly. He was the guy who exploded the largest nuclear bomb ever done by man, the one who started the rocket forces, who was going to threaten us with

intercontinental ballistic missiles. All that. But I think clearly in retrospect he was also someone with whom we could have come to agreements that would have been beneficial to us and beneficial to the world.

Q: I suppose one of the things I am getting at is as diplomats, sometimes, I think there is a tendency to look for somebody who is trying to be consistent. Even if they're opposed to us at least you know where they stand. Khrushchev seemed to be all over the place and this can sometimes be a bit disturbing to somebody with a diplomatic frame of mind. I think this may have played a role in this.

BREMENT: Yes, I think that is right. He was an innovator and we bureaucrats and diplomats don't much like innovation. We like somebody who is predictable. He was a little too unpredictable. It is not just a bureaucratic prejudice. His style was too unpredictable for us to do business with.

Q: And this was part of the cause of his downfall with his own bureaucracy.

BREMENT: Absolutely, they couldn't get a reading on him and that's why they couldn't function within their own system of central planning. Each member of the Politburo from his own bureaucratic perspective wanted to get rid of Khrushchev. That is why they could come together with only one dissenting vote, and that was Mikoyan, who only had all the force of foreign trade. There was no power there. I think there is something about the Foreign Service perspective that probably makes it not a useful tool for policy.

Q: Or in fast moving events sometimes.

BREMENT: Yes.

Q: On this, you had two Ambassadors who are quite well known. Foy Kohler and Walter Stoessel. Could you characterize how you saw them and how they operated and how you felt their effectiveness was?

BREMENT: Stoessel was of course DCM in Moscow the first time I was there, when Kohler was the Ambassador and he was instrumental in bringing me to Moscow to become Political Counselor, thereby yanking me out of Saigon after only thirteen months there.

Q: Let's talk about Foy Kohler now and we will talk about Stoessel later.

BREMENT: Okay, Kohler was a quiet, effective good Ambassador. He was highly skeptical of the Soviets, as well he should have been at that particular point. My impression (and I have never really talked to him about this) was that he felt that he was there at a period when nothing much could be done to move the relationship forward, and that he was holding the fort, so to speak, and carrying out our policy. But we were dealing with an essentially hostile power at a time when relations were getting worse, because the Soviets saw a need for both internal and external orthodoxy. And there wasn't much that could be done in terms of negotiating anything or coming to any agreements that would improve the relationship.

Q: One final thing here, two things, one that was in your bailiwick was the Japanese-Soviet relationship. This has always struck me, I've been curious about this. I have always thought that here was one place that the Soviets could probably make some mild concessions and work out some joint thing on Sakhalin and some of those islands and all, and work out something where their defensive interests would not be jeopardized but that would make the Japanese feel somewhat loved and wanted, and could have played on the anti-America feeling and all by doing this, and yet they have remained obdurate over this for 40 years. Why? As you saw it at that time...?

BREMENT: Well, as I saw it at that time and since, it is a real conundrum. The benefits to the Soviets of making a positive gesture to Japan are obvious. Yet they have refused to make one for 40 years. First of all, I would say about Brezhnev that he really was racially prejudiced against the Orientals. That's one thing that came out clearly in summit meetings

with him. And this was true against both the Japanese and the Chinese. Indeed, during several summit meetings he went off on the Chinese and just went on and on about their iniquity and about the common threat they pose to both of us. Clearly, it was deeper than just policy difference. The Russians also have a bad feeling about the Japanese, a feeling, by the way, that is returned by the Japanese. And they haven't forgotten the Russo-Japanese War. They see themselves as quite vulnerable in East Asia. They see the Japanese as an ultimate threat. Even in the Gorbachev period, it's hard to understand why they simply don't make some kind of move in terms of the Northern Islands, the so-called “northern territories.” It is such an obvious ploy. You say, “Look, we'd give you back the northern territories, but we can't because you've got the Seventh Fleet in Yokosuka and we don't want the waters around those islands to be used as passages for warships and for submarines to go into the Bering Sea and the Sea of Japan. If you demilitarize them and if you will allow us to put observers on them to monitor what ships are going in, you can have those islands back.”

It seems like such an obvious solution. It's been obvious for years, but I'll never forget my surprise that Brezhnev in '78 actually fortified those islands and put ten thousand people on them for no reason at all, except probably his Far East TVD commander thought it was a good idea. But that doesn't mean he has got to do it. So, you really run into a sort of dead-end here, in that there is no expert on the Soviet Union or Japan or on Soviet-Japanese relations who can really come up with a good theory as to why the Soviets haven't done that except that they don't like and don't trust the Japanese. They still remember and, in fact, they are just commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Khalkin Gol which the Japanese call Nomonhan, which took place in August of 1939 as the Soviets were negotiating the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. At the same time, the same day, a major pitched battle was going on on the Mongolian-Manchurian border where the Soviets claimed they killed 60,000 Japanese and only lost 18,000 Soviets and where the Japanese suffered a truly major defeat. This was Marshal Zhukov's first great battle. It was a classic double envelopment of the Japanese, where he simply destroyed the Sixth

Japanese Army. And the Soviets remember that. They are publishing all sorts of books about it. And Japan is simply not seen as a potential economic savior which it could be. The Soviets also are very uncomfortable that the Japanese have passed them in gross national product.

Q: One last thing on the Soviet side, right now as we are talking, really in the last year, 1989-90, the Soviet Union really is an empire. We used to say it in the Foreign Service as sort of lip-service, but we used to see it as a really unified whole. How were we seeing that, you were in the Soviet Union, I mean all these disparate nationalities, did you see this thing as having potential weakness or was this just sort of talk?

BREMENT: I think most of us mirrored the actual Soviet view of the problem, and that was that it wasn't much of a problem. And although you can say that we were obviously wrong, because of the latest developments, I am not sure that we were. Because the problem was then under control. It is Gorbachev who has allowed it to get out of control. I mean, there was no question about the unhappiness of some of the nationalities. But the fact was that they were effectively repressed. You didn't have to be a very acute or astute political observer to take a trip to the Baltic Republics and discover an awful lot of anti-Russian feeling. In fact, I remember I arrived in Tallinn at 5:00 a.m. one morning at the train station in January and it was at least 40 below, with the wind blowing hard. I got out on the platform and looked around hopefully for someone to meet me and, of course, there wasn't anyone. And there was a line for cabs across the platform with about 40 or 50 people lined up. So I went up to the train master in a little booth there and I said to him, I want to find a hotel. I had the name of the hotel I was going to and he said, rather he gestured to me, I don't understand you, what are you saying. I was talking Russian, of course. And then I said to him, “I am from the American Embassy and I was hoping there would be a car to meet me. But there isn't and I want to find the hotel.

Then he answered me in perfect Russian, saying the hotel is only fifty yards up the road. You can walk up there. It is very easy.” This was in the '60s. Of course there was

enormous anti-Russian feeling in the Baltics and much less anywhere else that you went. You found some to a certain extent. But that is only natural in any multi-national, multi-ethnic state. I mean you find some of that kind of animosity in Chicago, or Minneapolis or wherever you go with large ethnic groups or with people of different races living side by side. If you have this kind of situation you are going to find a certain amount of animosity. The question was never whether there was animosity, but whether it was under control. And it was under control. This was not just some outside observer talking; this was the way the Soviets felt. They felt it was under control, because they had no problems.

Gorbachev's book Perestroika, published in 1987, specifically states that the nationalities problem has been solved. But it obviously wasn't. It was merely concealed under a large KGB rock. The problems really only occur when you lift the rock. Then they are going to occur, sure. But every place outside the Baltics the problems are more inter-ethnic than anti-Russian. Many of those nationalities, like the Armenians, looked on the Russians as essentially their saviors, from the Muslim hordes or the Turks. So it is an Empire and now that the Pandora's box has been opened, it is hard to see how, in fact it will be shut. I think you can say that without question. But were we wrong in our thoughts about it at the time? Was I wrong? I don't think so. At the time I think we were essentially mirroring the view of the people who were there, both the Russians and the nationalities themselves.

Q: And we were reporting as it really was at the time. This is the way it was.

BREMENT: No. It wasn't like the Intifada. Nobody dared to throw a rock or to question authority.

Q: The Intifada being the repression of the Israelis on the Palestinians. Yes, I mean you could have been in Israel and you could have said the Palestinian problem is under control, and not foreseeing the Intifada, because that was the way it was. But it was a little different. The Intifada was going to happen. In the Soviet Union, it didn't have to happen the way it did happen and certainly if you are running a large empire you have to use a

certain amount of force, and once you let everybody know you are not going to use force, you are going to have a lot of difficulties.

I'm going to hop rather quickly over a couple of other things. You then spent some time at Stanford and then you went to Singapore as head of the political section from '67 to '70. What were the major things you dealt with at that time?

BREMENT: It was a very interesting period politically because Singapore was of course run by Lee Kuan Yew, “Harry Lee,” whose ambition had always been to be Prime Minister of Malaya. Then of course Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaya, which received independence in 1965. But because the population of Singapore was 90% Chinese, with Singapore in the Federation there were more Chinese than Malays in it. That was an impossible situation, particularly with the Chinese led by the obstreperous Lee Kuan Yew who spoke better Malay than the Malays. So the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman threw Singapore out in 1965. This was a tremendous shock; it left Singapore to sink or swim. And it gave Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues a terrific problem. When I got there in '67 they had gone through this first major trauma and were just coming out of it.

They had more or less figured out that without the Malayan hinterland Singapore could no longer exist simply as an entrepot, a trading center, that they would have to start doing manufacturing. Then, just at that point, the British gave them another tremendous blow, by saying that they were going to get out east of Suez. The British forces at that point were supplying something like 15 to 20% of the GNP of Singapore. So this was very serious. That was roughly the situation that I found when I arrived in Singapore.

I was watching the domestic situation to see how that would develop. Internationally, our relations were very much dominated by the Vietnam War, and Lee was sort of a quiet supporter. Indeed, the sort of nation building that he was doing in Singapore was of interest to us in terms of the CORDS program and what we were trying to do in Vietnam—build a nation there.

The US government was pretty interested in what was going on in Singapore, too. People liked to talk to Lee because he was a double first at Cambridge, and brilliant, and he was always quite a different kind of leader and encouraging to visiting Americans. So he was on the circuit. That is, no American would come out to the area without talking to Lee and getting the big picture from Lee Kuan Yew. He made a big splash in Washington, but he was cordially disliked by all the other people in the immediate region.

Q: What was his view of the situation? Did he subscribe to the view that if Vietnam went communist, particularly at the time you were there, that this would inevitably mean considerable pressure on the other countries in the area to go communist?

BREMENT: Yes, he very much subscribed to that thesis, certainly in regard to the mainland countries of Southeast Asia—especially Laos and Cambodia, which turned out to be the case. The question at that time, the pivotal place, was of course Thailand, which had three or four major insurgencies going on there. Lee felt that if Thailand went, the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, including Singapore, would inevitably follow. (The insurgency in Malaya had been defeated. It was about the only place where this happened. It was certainly the defeat of a major insurgency. That was largely, however, because the insurgents were Chinese, so they couldn't use the jungles with freedom because the Malays were definitely against them.) Lee was therefore very much interested in encouraging us to go on with what we were doing, resisting the expansion of communism. He was very much worried about what might happen to the other countries of Southeast Asia, and very much unsure of whether Singapore could make it as a separate political entity. He recognized that we might be forced out of Vietnam. But by making the effort we were buying time for the rest of Southeast Asia.

Q: How did you see the influence of the PRC in Singapore at the time? Was this pretty well squashed?

BREMENT: Pretty well squashed. There really wasn't much of an influence. They were thrown out of Malaysia essentially, where they had supported the insurgency. They were thrown out of Indonesia, when Sukarno was overthrown. There were, of course, a lot of sympathizers in Singapore. But we never had any evidence that the Chinese were trying to manipulate things in Singapore. They were more or less letting the situation alone, as far as we could tell. As far as we still can tell they have followed this policy until today.

Q: Then you had this unusual assignment which you have explained, of being brought over to Djakarta, as a public affairs officer, the Ambassador there was?

BREMENT: Frank Galbraith.

Q: Who had been in...

BREMENT: In Singapore.

Q: Here you were an outsider, what was your impression of USIA operations in Indonesia at the time when you got there?

BREMENT: I was there from '70 to '73, three years. I felt that there was an awful lot to be done; that we essentially had the tools to do it and that we weren't really as focused an operation as we could be. There was a lot of good work that could be done if it had the right sort of leadership. I found that a very rewarding tour.

Q: As you saw it and worked on it, what was the focus? There was the general ones of just going on and getting America mentioned favorably everywhere, and the other one is to focus on key people in key places and all; how did you feel in Indonesia?

BREMENT: Well, Indonesia is fairly unusual in that although it is a great country, with I think the fifth largest population in the world, there simply were not enough written materials in the Indonesian language. This was because the literate population of the

Dutch East Indies was entirely Dutch speaking, and the only people who had education had it in Dutch. And so there was an enormous shortage of simple reading material in the native language, and the various educational institutions were fighting at that time a losing battle. I have lost track, I don't know where they are today, but at that point it was fairly shocking. The situation they were in made it almost a certainty that anything of interest in the Indonesian language would be read by all the important people in the country. And so the aim of my USIA program was first of all to try to reach all those that counted with the message of the United States.

If you are talking about a population of 100-130 million, obviously you can't reach everybody. You try and pick out the 500 or so people that you want to reach, and try and get to them with your story. And in a country where there is this shortage of reading material, we felt that if you get to them with the right kind of reading material, they will actually read it. That is not the kind of approach for a country, say, like the United States, where it would be foolish. The Soviet Embassy can turn out the most carefully crafted written materials, but it won't really do them much good because they are not going to get the majority leader of the Senate to actually read the stuff. But in Indonesia this is not true. The comparable figure to the majority leader of the Senate will read something if you get it to him in the right way, particularly if you are in a position to call him and tell him he should read it. You could really do something like that in Indonesia, and that was the focus. I started a magazine there, which was fun, which was really hands down the most attractive magazine in the Indonesian language, and which was certainly read by any Indonesian who got hold of it.

We also had an important educational exchange program, which in my view is a tremendously important program in every country I've been in. There is just no substitute for exposing people to an American educational institution if you want to get rid of typical anti-American stereotypes. Indeed what turned Indonesia around as a country were the

military exchanges. Indonesia is a country that is run by the Indonesian army and that army had all been to Ft. Leavenworth. This made a big difference.

Q: What was your impression on the people who went to Ft. Leavenworth, was the American military able to do this well?

BREMENT: They did it very well. And it surprised me actually, the Indonesians being rather shy people. I would think a lot of them would get lost in that kind of situation. But being there with colleagues from other countries and with Americans in a situation where you are treated as an equal, and dealing with military problems in an equal way, people react very favorably to that. I know they certainly do at the Naval War College, in Newport. And indeed in that capacity I made a trip to Israel and Egypt, which was a US Navy trip, and so I got to meet the ranking officers of the Egyptian navy and the Israeli navy. And they had all been through this course at Newport. It really makes a big difference. I have no question that that is one of the most effective things the United States government can do. So anyway, I found the work in Indonesia quite rewarding. I found the language easy to learn. And it is sort of fun to have people and money and programs to run, which is really executive training, the sort of thing you never get in the State Department.

Q: Then it fell your due at some point to go where our main problem was at the time. You served in Vietnam in Saigon from '73 to '74. How did this appointment come about?

BREMENT: I was a Public Affairs Officer, one of the USIA's key public affairs officers in East Asia. And my predecessor in Saigon, Bob Lincoln, decided that he wanted to pack it in. He had been there a year or so, and so they needed somebody to replace him and they couldn't think of a USIA officer that they could send, or who wanted to go there. Anyway, they thought of me as the right person for the job, partly because of my Soviet and China background, partly because one of the things the director for East Asia, a fellow named Kent Crane, was very interested in was the psychological program directed against North

Vietnam. He thought I would be good at that. You would have to ask him why he thought I was the right person, but he certainly did. He twisted my arm.

Q: What was the situation in Vietnam at the time as you saw it?

BREMENT: I got there on what they called x plus 60, March 29, 1973, which was the day that supposedly all North Vietnamese troops got out of the South as part of the Paris agreements. And indeed peace was supposed to descend on Vietnam at that point. The government of Vietnam was treated by the embassy as a government that was going to be maintained forever and ever. It received major economic and other aid from the US. And when I got there the supposition was that it was going to endure.

Q: Was it the feeling that this was a pretty good peace accord? Were we getting what we wanted? or was it a matter of buying time?

BREMENT: I think everybody knew that it wasn't an ideal peace accord, and everybody doubted whether the Vietnamese would live with it. And of course there were carrots and sticks in there for the North Vietnamese. Their invasion of 1972 had been brutally beaten back with lots and lots of casualties. I really didn't know what I was going to find when I got there.

When I got there I certainly wasn't an expert on Vietnam. I was an expert on the international ramifications of the Vietnam situation. But I had never focused on the internal situation in Vietnam, except for a couple of relatively brief trips in 1969 and 1971. As I say, I didn't know much about the country. So I approached it with an open mind, with no preconceptions. I wouldn't say I was optimistic when I arrived, but I would say I was open-minded. I knew what the embassy line was—that this was a viable, going concern, that indeed if you counted up all the people in South Vietnam who were anti-communist, anti-North, starting with 800 thousand refugees from the North, one million school teachers and others who worked for the government, and then added the one million in the army, and you added all their dependents and so forth, you got a very heavy percentage of the

population that was anti-communist. There is no question about that. That was true. But the question was whether a majority of the population being anti-communist was enough, when you are up against an army that is going to attack you.

As I looked around as a political observer, I quickly reached the conclusion that all Vietnamese, of whatever political persuasion, were convinced that the Vietnam situation was not going to be settled in Saigon or Hanoi. It was going to be settled in Washington, or perhaps in Paris. Indeed that seemed like a reasonable assessment to me. And as long as the US government was committed to keeping a government in Saigon, I thought there was at least a chance, good chance, that the government in Saigon could be maintained. In retrospect, I would probably say that I was wildly optimistic, but not because of the situation in Vietnam. It was Washington I misjudged.

Q: Of course Watergate had not happened.

BREMENT: I was just about to say that. In fact, I can remember very well a luncheon with Huang Duc Nghia, who was their Minister of Information, and Thieu's cousin, and his most trusted advisor in some respects, and Tom Polgar, who was the station chief for CIA. Watergate was just happening, and I remember Polgar saying to Nghia, “look, in the United States in 1923 we had the Teapot Dome scandal, and in 1924 we elected a Republican. And the Teapot Dome scandal was the worst political scandal we have ever had. So this is important, but it will blow away. It's not going to have any influence on Vietnam at all.” I sort of looked at everyone to see if Polgar meant it and if Nghia accepted it. I kept quiet, but I was thinking at the time that this was a good line to take but who is kidding whom? Watergate was the death-knell of South Vietnam, it seemed perfectly apparent to me. And indeed, when I went home to get married, we had a conference with several people, including I remember, Scoop Jackson, who...

Q: Senator from Washington...

BREMENT: Senator from Washington and certainly in foreign affairs a staunch pro-defense, anti-Soviet figure for years and years. And he said to us, South Vietnam is doomed. No matter what happens, the United States government is not going to do anything about it. At that point I thought, well, it looks pretty bad.

Q: Well, what sort of activities were you carrying on then?

BREMENT: We had enormous USIA activities. I had 170 local employees and 35 American officers. We had a cultural center in Saigon with 20,000 students and a couple of thousand teachers. We had libraries. We had four cultural centers throughout the country, and libraries throughout the country. We had a big publications program, we had an enormous educational exchange program, and a big information program. That is what I was personally doing more than anything else. I was on the information side. There was also a press attach# who functioned as part of the embassy. He wasn't really under me, but he was a USIA officer, and sort of contributed. So we did everything in the whole information and cultural area—lots to do.

Q: Looking at it in retrospect, did it really make any difference what we did, as long as there isn't an army to back it up?

BREMENT: Well, I think there are probably an awful lot of Vietnamese in this country who got a good education in English from us, to start with. I think, yes, you have a certain effect, but you are not going to change the world by teaching people English, or by educating them, or by giving them the right information on a given subject. If you are dealing with a military threat you have to handle it militarily. Once you get enough people who are willing to carry guns and shoot you, there is only one answer, and that is you have to defend yourself with other people who have guns who are willing to shoot them back. And if you don't do that you are going to give up your liberty.

But there was always a chance, anyway throughout the entire period I was in Vietnam, which was only 15 months. I left in June '74. I remember at my departure there were lots of farewell dinners with various correspondents, very good American correspondents and other correspondents, who were much more skeptical than I was about the future of South Vietnam. Nobody was saying things were inevitable. But it did look bad. Things were getting pretty somber at that point. It did look like it wasn't going to last, not necessarily because of what was going on in South Vietnam. But the country was so dependent on the United States, not only for its economic wherewithal, but also in its military operations. I mean we had unfortunately, I think, in retrospect, taught them how to fight our way. Fighting our way meant you had an awful lot of ammunition that you used. Firepower was our God of war. And if you are going to all of a sudden take away ammunition, therefore you don't have firepower and have a lot of army officers who don't know how to fight under those conditions. All these tactics, all the way that they had been taught how to fight, was no longer any good. And that is indeed what happened. They simply got rolled up. But I left. I left in June of '74.

In January of '75 when I was in Moscow and I read that a remote provincial capital had been taken over by the North Vietnamese and there was just no reaction from Washington whatsoever, then I knew that it was finished. It was just a question of time. I was surprised that it went as quickly as it did, but it was just a question of time. Once the South Vietnamese realized that the Americans weren't coming to their aid, as they had in a similar situation in 1972, it was all over.

Q: You went to Moscow, again. This was as political counselor, from '74 to '76. How did you see the political situation then?

BREMENT: I was there for post-Watergate, after Nixon's removal. But it was still the Kissinger era of our diplomacy with the Soviets. So we were still maintaining our policy of detente, and still negotiating, trying to follow up on SALT I, with lots of summit meetings going back and forth. Unlike the first time I was in Moscow, the big difference was the

busyness of our embassy. The embassy was enormously busy, people coming through, delegations, exchanges. In the '60's it was a reporting embassy. That was all the embassy did. In the '70's, it was a working governmental embassy, with all sorts of things, all sorts of people coming through.

The internal situation of the Soviet Union was very stable. In fact the mark of the Brezhnev period altogether in Soviet history is that he just got people in one job and if there was no trouble, then they stayed in that job. Now it is called the period of stagnation. But things were looking up for the Soviets in that period. The Soviets were saying and believing that the correlation of forces in the world was moving in their direction. The economy was still improving. New oil sources had been opened and the export of oil meant major hard currency accounts opened up for the Soviets. There was a good deal of cleaning up in the center of Moscow, with new construction along a street called the Arbas. Moscow doesn't change much, compared to other cities, but at least compared to its own past things looked a lot better and I think there was a certain sense of optimism, certainly in the Foreign Ministry. People felt the US was in decline and that things were moving in Soviet favor.

Q: Did you find more openness with the Soviet officials and all?

BREMENT: There was much more openness, though I would say I was in a different position as Political Counselor than I was as a Second Secretary. And this was the era of detente so I could have access to many more people. Whereas the first time Moscow was a very buttoned up place. And I was Political Counselor, which meant that I had entre to everybody in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There was always a reason for me to see somebody, whereas the first time I was dealing with Asia so I didn't have a particular reason to go, other than to deal strictly with Asian affairs, where we were at loggerheads. But the main difference was that in the era of detente it was quite encouraged by Soviet authorities to see people from the American embassy, if you had a legitimate reason to see them. So that was one factor, and then you had the dissidents, which was another

factor. You had a whole new different angle on the Soviet Union that you couldn't get before from Soviet citizens. But even the dissidents weren't very good at giving the big picture. Their objectivity was always in question. They were painting a gloomy picture of their lives in the Soviet Union, of conditions in the Soviet Union, of the way they and their friends had to live, of the future of the Soviet Union, and of the lack of imagination of the Soviet bureaucrats, and so forth. But they weren't conveying a sense of a Soviet Union that was falling apart, or a system that was being broken down, or indeed of a system that was going to fall apart.

Q: The dissidents became quite a focus, but how did we feel about them, they were obviously damn good news for people who wanted stories. That was something else. But the embassy looks at any group from a professional view point, did you find them useful?

BREMENT: Well, they added to your work load, but yes, I found it useful to be able to talk to people who were native to the society who were skeptical about the society. They would talk honestly, and that is a heady experience after you have been in Moscow for awhile. I do remember going out to visit Jack Scanlan in Warsaw, and being enormously struck about how different the Poles were. The Polish officials sounded to me like Soviet dissidents, that is about the level at which you could talk to people. But of course I was in Moscow in the '60s for the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial, all remnants of the thaw that began under Khrushchev in the cultural field. The rigidly doctrinaire Suslov, their chief ideologist, cut off the Soviet intellectuals and really ratcheted down the situation. So stagnation culturally is probably a good way to characterize the situation. Politically there were no changes. Diplomatically they had a whole series of successes. They thought they resolved the German problem, through the various German-Polish treaties, and then through the Helsinki Final Act. They achieved what they had been aiming for all along, that was a ratification of the borders as they emerged from the Second World War in Europe. This the United States essentially ratified, and this was a major diplomatic achievement. It was what Gromyko had been working for for twenty years. So things were looking up for the Soviets. And indeed, when they sent a Cuban army to Angola, that surprised

everybody, because they hadn't done anything like that before. But it was part of the upbeat expansion of their role in the world.

Q: Did this Cuban army in Angola make us rearrange our thoughts about the top? Did we see this as a resurgent aggressive power?

BREMENT: Yes, I think we certainly did. I'd have to check Kissinger's memoirs, but I remember his last trip to Moscow was when I was there in '76 and essentially he was saying that. In not too veiled diplomatic language, he said that you can't really have an Angola and call the situation d#tente. You can't do that and then talk about not taking “unilateral advantage” of the other party, as was stipulated in a signed solemn agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States on the prevention of war. You cannot sign such an agreement in 1972, and then go on and ship a Cuban army to Angola. The two things are not compatible. When it came to the United States, in the Presidential election of '76, Ford got rid of “detente” as a word describing US policy because it became extremely unpopular in the United States, and with damn good reason in my view.

Q: ...and was this the attitude? Did you see a swing in attitude of the officers of the Embassy?

BREMENT: No, they were all pretty shell-shocked. Life in Moscow became much less pleasant.

Q: This was not a euphoric time for anyone in Moscow...

BREMENT: I don't think anyone who has ever served in Moscow has ever been euphoric. The only time I ever saw a real change from the Soviet side was during the Apollo-Soyuz mission, the joint Soviet-US space mission. The Soviet press for about three weeks read like the press of any other country. There was never anything wrong, no racial situation in Detroit, no lynchings in Texas or whatever. Nothing was wrong with the United States at that point, for about three weeks and then it went back to what it was before. You work in

the embassy and you have the constant pressure from Soviet surveillance—planting bugs, planting bugs on you. Indeed, we had the whole microwave problem at that time, which was pretty grim for a lot of people and sent Embassy morale into a nosedive.

Q: Could you explain what this was?

BREMENT: It was an interesting example of the different perspectives that you have on these things. Because of really different views within the United States government on what was permissible to happen to its employees, and the legal status and the moral status of those employees, we went public with the fact that for years the Soviets had been beaming microwaves at the sensitive sections of our embassy. It is still a question whether low doses of microwaves are injurious to one's health or not. Indeed, if they are, then a lot of people in this country are in a lot more danger than the people in our embassy in Moscow. Anybody living near a TV tower is getting a lot more microwaves than a guy in the American embassy. The difference was that they were beamed on a very narrow frequency, so that you were getting a charged beam at you in the embassy in Moscow, whereas nobody else in the world has ever suffered that kind of treatment before because you don't get that normally. On a navy communications ship the radiation is through the whole spectrum of microwaves, where in this case it was just one narrow beam. So anyway, when we went public on this, quite understandably a lot of ladies became very worried about what it was doing to their babies. Indeed, a lot of people talked about birth defects, and a lot of people got cancer. There was a mysterious outbreak of appendicitis in the embassy among people just on the right floor where the microwaves were being beamed, my wife being one of those. So, it became a tremendous morale question, and we tried to get the Soviets to turn it off. And they kept saying this is ridiculous, it is just Cold War thinking, and so forth. They never could really understand what it was we were talking about.

Q: Was this really not understanding or was it just that the KGB was so much in control?

BREMENT: I think the Soviets genuinely felt that we wanted them to turn off the microwaves and that we were being ingenuous in our stated reasons. They thought the reason wasn't the health of our employees. The reason was we just wanted them to turn off those microwaves. And we were generating this publicity in order to put unacceptable pressure on them to get them to do what we wanted them to do. That, I think, is how the Soviets genuinely saw it, because their medical literature, and even our medical literature does not make an unimpeachable case that these microwaves are genuinely injurious. The dosage was well below our own safety standards.

Q: One final comment on this. I served five years in the embassy in Yugoslavia. We knew people were trying to listen, and sometimes I think we get hyper sensitive about being listened to. I am not quite sure. Do you feel that really a lot is coming out from this? Does it really make a difference from an intelligence point of view?

BREMENT: I think very little. I would say that there was a difference between the Soviet Union and other countries, in that we know that the Soviets devote more effort to this, an enormous effort. Something like thousands of people are employed in the various surveillance functions that they have just against the American embassy. I think the way they do it is that they have a bank of listening devices and most of the time no one is talking. When they start conversing something gets switched on and it triggers the recording mechanism.

I think the Soviets more or less size you up one way or another as a personality, and figure out what kind of work you are doing and if you are not a target, they really don't pay too much attention to you. If you are happily married, or moderately happily married, they really don't care about your sex life. But if they have some reason to think you may have homosexual tendencies, or that you may have financial problems that would allow them to blackmail you, something blackmailable, then the KGB will certainly operate. I know of two cases where they used homosexual bait essentially to get somebody at the embassy. And there is just no way they would have known that these people had homosexual tendencies

without the microphones. One of them was married. So it can be a useful means for a blackmailer to learn the forbidden secrets of his quarry.

Q: So it is not so much the information but a means at getting to somebody?

BREMENT: Yes. I think it is more of a means to blackmail somebody. I think it would be rare indeed, that they would get specific information they were looking for from the domestic conversations of embassy officers.

I would really be curious to look at my own file, because I am sure it contains the most bizarre misunderstandings. They have people who are really good in English, but not that many. They couldn't really listen to even this kind of a conversation without making a lot of mistakes, unless they were native speakers, or close to native speakers.

Q: You don't have that many. Well, I want to move...

BREMENT: And very few people would talk to their wives about sensitive political or military information. The value of the listening devices is to get somebody.

Q: I am going to skip over your Madrid period and go right to your NSC days because I realize time is running out. You were with the National Security Council from '79 to '81. What were you doing there?

BREMENT: I was in charge of Soviet affairs.

Q: And this was under the Carter administration?

BREMENT: The Carter administration, Brzezinski was the National Security Advisor.

Q: How did you get the job?

BREMENT: I was in Madrid and Brzezinski called me on the phone one day and said would you like to do this? And I said that it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

Q: Could you talk about Zbigniew Brzezinski. He is a very controversial figure, and how did he operate and how effective was he do you think?

BREMENT: First of all, I would say he is a very quick mind, one of the quickest minds I have ever come across. And indeed it was sometimes frustrating to deal with him, just to talk with him, because he was always turning the corner before you reached the corner. And sometimes he was turning the corner the wrong way. I found the best way to communicate with him was in writing. He is very conscientious and, unlike some people, makes a point of reading what his staff sends him. He is a speed reader, and got through his in-box every day, so that you could send him a note and get an answer back the next day. So in terms of somebody to work for, he was a jewel, a joy, because I think the most frustrating thing that you can have as an employee in any bureaucracy is to keep dropping things with your boss and having the feeling they are going down a deep well, never getting read and never getting acted on.

He would turn material around. If you had ideas they would get to the President very quickly. I have often had the experience of, say, writing a memo on a Thursday afternoon, and indeed if Brzezinski thought it was worth his while he would hand it to the President the next morning at 7 a.m. and so by 9 a.m. I would have Presidential marginalia on the memo already.

Carter also was a workaholic, and one who got through his in-box. So in that sense you really had a feeling you were doing something when you were working on the staff. Indeed there is something about being in the Executive Office Building—my office was the same one that Franklin Roosevelt had had when he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. And when you are looking out the window you are looking at the West wing of the White House

—where the action is. So I found it an extraordinarily stimulating, and worthwhile place to work. I enjoyed it very much.

In terms of Zbig's effectiveness, he had great skills as a National Security Advisor. He was meticulously fair. He had strong opinions, but he was meticulously fair about presenting other people's opinions. And he is the best person I have ever encountered at summarizing what already has taken place. I've been at several meetings where the President walked in and the meeting had been going on for as much as an hour, and he would say, “Zbig what's happened?” And in three minutes Zbig would summarize beautifully exactly what it was about, the position of everybody at the table and so forth. He has that wonderful academic quality of being able to take what is happening and put it into paragraphs and sub-paragraphs, in an outline form, like the outline button on a computer. He gets it in outline form in his mind and he remembers the three points and the four sub-points. So he is very good at that. Being so quick, he has the drawback of being somewhat flip on non- important matters occasionally. I think he can go off the reservation sometimes. But by and large I think he was a very effective National Security Advisor.

The real thing that you learn by working on the NSC staff, and one should really learn it around Washington but few people do, is that it is the President who calls the tune, it is not the National Security Advisor or the Secretary of State. If you want to find out what is happening and why it is happening, look at the President. Brzezinski working for Carter is a very different person than he would have been working for Nixon, say, and it would have been a very different NSC staff.

Q: But what in your field, Soviet affairs which was obviously the keystone, what was Carter interested in?

BREMENT: My own criticism of Carter is that he didn't have a grand design. Brzezinski did. But Carter didn't. I don't think he had a world view of the Soviets. And I don't think he was after anything. He had a clear short term view of what he wanted from the Soviets. He

wanted certain things. He wanted the SALT agreement. Arms control was a good thing, according to Carter, and therefore we should move ahead with the SALT II agreement. But the Soviets throughout the period were doing things that should have evoked a much sharper response from the President, from the State Department, but did not. That in my view was very unfortunate.

Q: Obviously the war in Afghanistan was the big one, you arrived there...

BREMENT: I arrived there before Afghanistan. I arrived there just in time for the Soviet brigade in Cuba mini-crisis, which everyone has forgotten now.

Q: That was a non-crisis really, wasn't it?

BREMENT: It should have been a non-crisis. But it was a crisis.

Q: Could you explain what that was?

BREMENT: Essentially the US government went public with the allegation that the Soviets introduced a brigade into Cuba, and that this brigade indeed had to be removed because this act contravened certain gentlemen's agreements between us. And several Senators indicated that if this brigade was not removed, they would not ratify the SALT II treaty, which was a cornerstone of Carter's foreign policy. So the aim of the government was to try and get the Soviets to remove the brigade. The unfortunate fact was that the Soviets had not introduced a new brigade at all. They had had that brigade there for twenty years ever since the Cuban missile crisis. But the United States government simply forgot about it. We didn't know it was there.

Q: This is part of the problem of no institutional memory.

BREMENT: That is definitely a problem of no institutional memory. And, oddly enough, we had the photographs. It is not as though we didn't have photographs. But we just simply didn't have any analysts who were looking at those photographs with any real interest

because the doings of a small brigade of 4,000 men was of no military consequence and no intelligence interest.

Q: How was Carter responding to this as far as you were seeing from reports or requests to you?

BREMENT: Carter was talking continually to various Senators and other politicians, including foreign leaders, about it. But he did not get into substance much. On that I simply think Carter said, lets settle this damn thing. And he left it up to Vance and Dobrynin to figure out some kind of solution.

Q: How was the thing worked out?

BREMENT: Well, finally, we sort of had to just put it aside. There was a limit on what the Soviets could be expected to do. That is essentially what Carter did. He made a speech saying that this is a bad thing and we have to worry about it. And indeed we are going to establish a Rapid Deployment Force to deal with threats such as the Soviet Brigade. But it is not important enough to gainsay the important work we are doing on the SALT II treaty. I am still for the ratification of SALT. This is just the way it is and we have to live with it. That's the bottom line on that one. But an awful lot of work went into that. It certainly wasn't the line I was recommending.

Q: Well, let me ask how. Here you are in charge of Soviet affairs on the NSC. How did you get your information and how did you work with the other agencies, including State and Defense?

BREMENT: I got all the cables that the State Department gets and I had contacts with people in various positions in the various agencies. There was an NIO for Soviet affairs in the CIA, Arnold Horelick; Assistant Secretary for Europe in the State Department, George Vest; there wasn't one person in the Defense Department who was an exact counterpart, but I would deal quite a bit with Walt Slocum on the brigade crisis. We formed a group

at the Under Secretary level of the various departments. It included David Newsom, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the State Department, Deputy Director of the CIA Carlucci, Under Secretary of Defense Walt Slocum and we would deal with it. I would call meetings and we would go over it almost day by day to make sure we were all reading from the same script. I can't think of anything special that we did that would be surprising, but using the NSC position is the natural way to get various agencies together.

Q: What I am trying to get is the picture. This is not saying, "Oh my God we've got a crisis here in Afghanistan" so you would run and sit down at your typewriter and type out something...

BREMENT: Well, what would happen when you say "Oh my God we've got a crisis in Afghanistan" is that there will be a meeting of the real National Security Council, chaired by the President. To prepare the President for the meeting I would write a memo from Brzezinski to the President and a covering memo from me to Brzezinski, getting the President and Brzezinski ready for that National Security Council meeting. Then, growing out of that National Security Council meeting, there would be decisions taken of various kinds. Since they were Presidential decisions it would be my function to see that those decisions are indeed implemented, which would mean in some cases, if it was clearly a State Department function, I would simply liaise with the Assistant Secretary of State who dealt with the matter. Or if it was an inter-agency question, as in say Afghanistan, then I would call a group together and we would deal with certain basic questions on how we are going to handle it. And then indeed if some special committee grows out of this work, like I ran an inter-agency committee on getting the word out on what was happening in Afghanistan, that would be a different group of people, at a lower level, but always making sure that everybody was aware of what was going on.

Q: Were there any injunctions on you all, not you specifically but anyone within the National Security Council staff, Brzezinski or anyone saying "Don't go around and say the President wants this or the President wants that." You know this idea that other

departments get somebody sometimes from the National Security Council staff speaking as though this were a direct order from the President. Were you under caveats to watch out for this or not?

BREMENT: I can't recall any specifically, but it is quite possible that he may have said something like that in a general staff meeting. I am pretty careful about things like that myself. But it is true that a lot of people on the staff suffer from White House sickness, and just can't get over the awe they feel at being there. And they indeed try to make anything they do sound like the President just told them to do this. It comes from a certain inferiority complex, because you are dealing in almost all cases with people who are well above you in seniority.

I was certainly doing that as a Foreign Service Officer, because the people I dealt with were usually more or less at the same level. But on important matters I dealt with the Assistant Secretary for Europe, or the Under Secretary. These were people who were very eminent within the Foreign Service and I was just another senior officer at the time. And so you have got to get used to that. But indeed when some people are placed in that kind of a position, they tend to not handle it with grace. But it was a very thin staff. I really had nobody working for me. So I would go to these interagency meetings and if there were tasks to do, everybody else would go back and have somebody to do it, whereas if I had to do it I had to do it by myself.

Q: Probably a healthy inhibitor sometimes.

BREMENT: It is, yes. I am convinced of the importance to the United States of having a strong and very capable NSC staff with really top people in it. That is absolutely essential to our system of government. But I think the staff should be small.

Q: I've heard that he was suspicious of the Foreign Service. Did you find this?

BREMENT: I don't think Zbig was suspicious particularly, of the Foreign Service. He had a number of Foreign Service Officers working for him. I think he was pretty contemptuous of the State Department. And indeed I think that even if you are a Foreign Service Officer, when you sit over there in the White House and see what comes out of the State Department for the President of the United States, you grow pretty contemptuous of the State Department.

Q: What's the problem?

BREMENT: It's a repeated problem. It is just that the State Department functions for the Secretary of State and they will send something over to the White House uncleared by anyone of importance that they would never send to the Secretary of State. It's a question of overloaded staff work. I am talking about routine stuff. The problem is roughly this: you are coming up to an Economic Summit and you get a request for a talking paper from the State Department. The President is going to see the Japanese Prime Minister, and what should the President say to the Japanese Prime Minister? So the request goes to the junior guy on the Japan desk who has just joined the government and he sits down and writes his idea of what the President should say to the Japanese Prime Minister. And then he sends it out to 38 offices for clearance and they all come back with their own particular axe to grind. He should definitely raise the question of the Honda plant in Harlingen, Texas, or whatever, where they are not using union labor or some such thing. He dutifully puts it all in there. And so by the time he is finished he has a whole tome on US-Japanese relations, which runs 7 or 8 pages single spaced.

Unfortunately, what happens is that this then makes its way through the bureaucracy, through everybody who is busy with other things, particularly if there is a Summit coming on. And you get it over there on the NSC staff, and you have this 8 page single spaced document and you look at the schedule and you find that the President is only going to

be talking to the Japanese Prime Minister on a drive from the Canadian Embassy to the British Embassy.

And so you file it in the wastepaper basket and write your own memo saying you are going to be seeing Nomura on a ten minute drive to the British Embassy and the only thing you should really raise with him is the question of supporting the exchange rate which you talked about the last time, because the Japanese really haven't been doing anything about this other than putting us off. And then you send that in to the President. And if you feel nasty you send the State Department's memo in to Brzezinski, with a little note saying this is what the State Department thinks the President should say to the Japanese Prime Minister in a 13-minute limousine ride.

The State Department simply doesn't function well. President after President feels, with good reason, that the State Department has its own agenda. It is not there to support him. It spends its time explaining and is supporting the other side. And that's often the State Department position. They feel obligated to present the Canadian position, say, which is fine. You should present the Canadian position. But then you shouldn't defend it. If the Secretary gets captured by the State Department, then he begins to be seen that way.

Q: How was Vance seen by you all in the NSC?

BREMENT: One of the real problems of the Carter administration was that Vance and Brzezinski both had world views and these world views were diametrically opposite. Carter, I think, thought this was a good thing because it gave him the chance to judge between them. But the net result was that the United States position on issue after issue would be decided by Carter based on how he felt that particular morning. Since he didn't have any grand world view, there was never any consistency in what was being conveyed, so that the Soviet Union for one, simply shrugged their shoulders and gave up. They couldn't figure out what the United States was up to. I mean when the Soviets sent a Soviet general to Ethiopia to command Ethiopian troops using great hunks of Soviet

military equipment to combat the Eritrean rebels and to go up against the Somalians, we didn't say boo. We didn't say a word; we didn't do anything when Sharansky was sent to Siberia.

Q: The well known dissident...

BREMENT: The well known Jewish dissident, we indeed made representations and we cut off a few exchanges just to show our displeasure. Well what the hell are the Soviets going to make out of that one? They are going to make out of that that they could do whatever they wanted in Ethiopia and the United States really didn't care. But that is a mistake, that is terrible. It sends the wrong signal. In that sense we have a heavy responsibility ourselves for the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. The Soviets could not appreciate what the American reaction was going to be.

Q: This was a period of expanded adventurism in Africa?

BREMENT: Yes, indeed, and we'll get to Afghanistan in a minute.

Q: but...

BREMENT: Also Southeast Asia

Q: How were you responding, you were writing up things for Brzezinski...

BREMENT: Well I came at the end of it. So much really happened before my time on the job. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was in the spring of '79 and I didn't get there until June of '79. So all that, the various things in Africa and Ethiopia, Angola, and so forth had taken place from '75 to '78 really.

Q: Well, where was Brzezinski standing on these?

BREMENT: Brzezinski was saying that the Soviets ought to be talked to about this. Vance was essentially saying we don't want to get into this kind of thing with the Soviets.

Q: When you were there what were the major...I suppose the major thing was Afghanistan?

BREMENT: Yes, the Soviet brigade in Cuba, followed by Afghanistan.

Q: Could you tell how you saw the Afghan thing and our reaction to it? And some of the players from your vantage point?

BREMENT: Well, the thing is we had enough indicators to see the Afghan thing developing. It looked pretty ominous, to the point that at the beginning of December we actually made some representations to the Soviets, but in a halfhearted way.

Marshall Shulman, who was Vance's advisor on Soviet affairs, was very much of the school that what we should be doing with the Soviets was increasing exchanges and trying to increase our links to the greatest extent possible; and that we shouldn't care what they do in the third world, which really wasn't of any major importance to us, shouldn't let it get in the way. These are bad people and they are going to keep doing bad things. We all know that. But there is a whole society out there that we have to reach. I think that was the general philosophy. I hope I am not misstating that. But the whole focus of the Carter administration in the fall of 1979 was on getting SALT ratified. So we were really under great pressure not to enlarge the Soviet threat unnecessarily. And the brigade in Cuba thing had been a fiasco, and made SALT II ratification almost impossible. Everybody understood that. So we were concentrating on playing down anything that might be happening with the Soviets other than making some representations when we caught the various indicators that they were building up along the border and it looked like they might be up to something. They indeed had sent Pavlovsky, the head of their infantry forces on a 10 week visit to Afghanistan during that period. And he was clearly looking around very

carefully at the ground. But we couldn't really read that one and we weren't suppose to know about it so we couldn't complain. But it was too late. That was only a week or two before the adventure started.

Q: How was Carter responding to these developments?

BREMENT: I don't know if he was really being kept abreast of them or not. Essentially, that would be the function of his intelligence briefings, which I was not privy to. We certainly had enough indicators so he must have gotten some whiff that something might be in the offing. A full-scale invasion of Afghanistan clearly took him by surprise, as it did the CIA. In fact, he made a famous statement—"I learned more about the Soviets last night than I did in my three previous years in office." This wasn't greeted by his Soviet advisor with great applause.

Q: Did you feel after this...Christmas eve wasn't it? that this was a whole new ball game as far as what you would be sending up?

BREMENT: Yes, it was clear right away that, first of all, the major aim of the administration, the SALT II agreement, was dead, and that it would have to be withdrawn from the Senate. That was the first thing. But it is an interesting example of the way the government functions that when I was looking around for ways for Carter to respond—because there was a political necessity for the President of the United States to respond to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It was too important an act for the President of the United States to simply shrug off. Yet when you started to look around at what the President of the United States could do about it, the answer was not too damn much. And so I spent the next couple of months fighting the battle of grain embargoes, and the battle of the Olympics, and those were the only two ways we thought we could respond to this horrendous development in an appropriate manner.

Q: You were looking around, these were think sessions, or what do you do? How to be beastly to the Russians?

BREMENT: Well, for instance, in December of 1980, when we thought they were going to invade Poland, as soon as something like this happens you think about every possible contingency and you make a list of thirty things that the President can do, which includes various military deployments, demarches, speeches at the UN, and so forth, but only very few had any teeth, would make any difference. And indeed when we thought about Afghanistan, we knew the things that were available right away. It didn't take any great imagination because you really can't come up with new ideas that have not been thought of before. A grain embargo was one thing. So we stopped selling grain to the Soviets and tried to get others to join us in an embargo to express international displeasure. We were singularly unsuccessful in doing that. Then we boycotted the Moscow Olympics. And indeed we put great pressure on various people to do that as well, to Helmut Schmidt's great displeasure. He claims that Warren Christopher had told him when he went through Europe that the United States was not going to boycott the Olympics and so Schmidt announced that the Germans wouldn't boycott them. And then he was told that we would. It made him feel very uncomfortable with the US government. Of course Schmidt hated Brzezinski, and felt great contempt for Jimmy Carter.

Q: This was almost visceral would you say?

BREMENT: Visceral, yes.

Q: One last thing and then I will let you go. You mentioned concern over the invasion of Poland. I recall this. This was 1980 when it looked like the Brezhnev doctrine was going to be re-done. How were you seeing it from your point of view?

BREMENT: From the intelligence coming in it seemed clear that they were going to invade. And we...I can't remember what I can say about this because it was all Top Secret

at the time. I know that Brzezinski has sort of opened this up because he has written an article about it. But essentially we reacted in a way that led Brzezinski to claim that we stopped it. And this was of course at a period when Carter was very much a lame duck President.

Q: Did you have the feeling that Brzezinski was more Polish than American? I mean I'm not talking about loyalty, but I mean as far as his instincts, and all this, that he thought as a Pole and was centered on the Soviet Union?

BREMENT: I think Brzezinski was very conscious of the fact that he was Polish born, that he had an accent. And the fact that he was in the White House doing this job was a very important thing for him personally and a matter of great honor and trust that he would never treat lightly. But he was certainly a Polish-American and he used to have long conversations with the Pope in Polish. I remember being in his outer office listening to him talk to the Pope, but I think his focus was completely American. I think his Polish heritage influenced him in his view of the Russians. Yes, I think there was a certain visceral feeling there and I think they cordially returned it but I don't think it got in the way of policy decisions or judgments.

Q: One last thing, how do we view Brzezinski, he wasn't quite doddering...this was towards the end, but this was '79 to '81 did you feel that Brzezinski was pretty much in command of things?

BREMENT: Oh very much so, yes. Very few people in the government were as in command of their in-box, if any, as Brzezinski.

Q: Excuse me, I have said this completely wrong, I meant Brezhnev.

BREMENT: I was wondering about doddering. Yes, Brezhnev was in bad shape. We knew from intelligence that he was working two or three hours a day and even at that he was having trouble concentrating. When he met with Carter in Vienna, in June '79, when Carter

would raise something, one of Brezhnev's aids would hand him an index card, and he would read the answer. He was not capable of handling it by himself. He was sort of the living dead.

Q: Was this sort of disturbing to everyone, because who was in charge? Where do you...?

BREMENT: It really was disturbing. And indeed I think the invasion of Afghanistan might well have been different if the Soviets had had a leader who was fully in command of the situation and the entire broad picture. I am always curious to know what Gromyko did about that. He presumably should have had the function of arguing against it, because of the way it would affect relations not only with the United States, but with the West, the third world. It was an absolutely disastrous decision for the Soviets, the beginning of the end of the Brezhnev security system, that Gromyko had worked so hard to set up.

Q: Well, I know we are under some time constraint here, and I want to thank you very much.

End of interview